

## LIFE

## Dunhuang destined to dazzle onstage

Musical drama integrates advanced technology with ancient art to tell a contemporary story, **Chen Nan** reports.

When theater director and president of the National Theatre of China, Tian Qinxin, heard the story of artist Chang Shuhong (1904-94), she was inspired and intrigued.

One of the most eminent Chinese artists to study in France, Chang discovered a book containing photographs of hundreds of Dunhuang paintings and manuscripts in an old bookstore in Paris in 1935.

It was written by Paul Pelliot, the French Sinologist, who is credited with rediscovering the Mogao Caves — now a UNESCO World Heritage Site — in Gansu province. Before he read the book, Chang didn't know about the caves, which contain some of the finest examples of Buddhist art in China, and were created over a span of 1,000 years.

The discovery prompted Chang to return to China to study the grotoes. He arrived in Dunhuang, where the Mogao Grottoes are located, in early 1943. He endured poor living conditions, staying in a dilapidated temple, his bed, desk and chairs made of clay. In 1944, he founded the Dunhuang Art Institute, which is now known as Dunhuang Academy.

Her admiration for Chang's courage and determination prompted Tian to write a script, which has been turned into the musical drama, *The Summoning of Dunhuang*.

On Oct 30, Tian announced that the production will premiere in Beijing this December in tribute to the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, and the 80th anniversary of the Dunhuang Academy. The production honors the spirit of Dunhuang culture, and tells a remarkable story that intertwines the lives of generations of youth at different times and places, from France to China.

The narrative spans a century and begins with Chang, who came to be known as the "guardian of Dunhuang"; and his wife Chen Zhixiu. As the story unfolds, legendary and moving tales of Dunhuang's past are revealed, so that Chang's story is connected to young people today.

Tian says that unlike traditional productions, the musical drama is a deep integration of theatrical art and digital technology, and explores the creative presentation of traditional Chinese culture.

As playwright and director, Tian says she found the production both challenging and innovative, as it blends art forms such as drama, music and dance, and makes use of film, 2D, 3D and artificial intelligence technology to break through the barriers between drama, music and live performance. The use of the latest technology allows the audience to fully appreciate the



**Above:** Singer-actor Zhang Yixing (front right) and main cast members of the theatrical production *The Summoning of Dunhuang* perform a song at the media event on Oct 30.

**Clockwise from left:** Young actors and actresses of the National Theatre of China, who will play major roles in *The Summoning of Dunhuang*, at the media event on Oct 30; Tian Qinxin, the president of the National Theatre of China, who is the scriptwriter and director of the production; Zhang Yixing at a rehearsal for the musical drama. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

richness and depth of Dunhuang art through the collision of tradition and modernity, as well as the interaction between content and technology.

"How to achieve the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese culture through art has been a long-term topic of exploration for theater, one we faced during the creative process," says Tian, adding that in May this year, the team traveled to Dunhuang for field research and discussions with the Dunhuang Academy.

"Walking in Dunhuang made us feel as if we had crossed a thousand years, and we experienced the power of Chinese cultural heritage. Our goal is to rejuvenate Dunhuang art, to allow more young people to witness the age-long transmission and vitality of Chinese civilization," she says.

"After more than six months of in-depth field research, script-writing and rehearsals, the production is about to meet the audience. We are striving to use the power of technology and the beauty of art to give new meaning to Dunhuang culture, in the hope of leading the audience through the ancient and modern, the domestic and the foreign, to experience the power and deep call of Chinese culture displayed in the brilliance of Dunhuang, and the warmth of personal emotions," adds Cheng Peng, vice-president of the National Theatre of China.

This new production brings together a lineup of young actors and actresses, led by singer-actor Zhang Yixing, who performed the musical drama's theme song during the media event on Oct 30 along with other cast members.

"I have been interested in Dunhuang for years, and being part of this process is a precious growth opportunity for us young actors, and we hope to contribute with our collective efforts," says Zhang, who will play the role of Chang Shuhong in 1935, as well as that of a young staff member at the Dunhuang Academy in 2035. The 33-year-old has a large fan base as a singer, and has over 50 million followers on social media platform Sina Weibo.

With songwriter Peter Kam as music director, the production includes 20 musical pieces, featuring Chinese styles and French influences, on a variety of themes ranging from heartbreak to grand expressions of history and tradition.

"I have been involved in lots of musicals and I enjoyed working with these young artists. Though it tells the story of Dunhuang, which is ancient, the music is contemporary, and appeals to a young audience," says Kam.

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## TV series sheds light on modern life in Lhasa

By XING WEN  
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Lhasa, the capital of the Xizang autonomous region, which lies at an altitude of 3,650 meters above sea level, has long been known as the "city of sunlight" as it gets an average of more than 3,000 hours of sunshine a year.

For many outsiders, the city, with its rich history, ethnic culture, and the spectacular natural wonders of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, which is known as the "roof of the world", remains a mysterious, distant land.

A recent 21-episode TV series *The City of Sunlight* seeks to open a window on modern urban life in Lhasa for a wider group of viewers, through the stories of young people and their choices in life, career paths and emotional decisions.

The drama topped the ratings for eight consecutive days when it was broadcast on China Central Television's CCTV-1, according to CVB, a television show statistics collector affiliated with the National Radio and Television Administration. It also received a 9 out of 10 rating on the review site Douban.

The main storyline revolves around the family of Thubten, the leader of a Tibetan Opera troupe in



**Left:** Wangdron Tso plays Cho Dzong who runs a teahouse in the TV drama *The City of Sunlight*. **Right:** Zhou You plays a Tibetan who wishes to run a trading company to promote local specialties of the Xizang autonomous region in the recently aired series. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Lhasa, who is highly respected in the local community.

A strict father who follows tradition, Thubten's expectations are challenged by his daughter and two sons, who each pursue their own dreams and paths in life.

His daughter, Cho Dzong, falls in love with Xu Shaojie, a cadre member from Shandong province, leading to the dilemma about whether she should marry and move away from her hometown.

One of his sons, Sonam, is supposed to become a civil servant, a job

Thubten considers stable, but Sonam is determined to run a trading company to promote local specialties like chili peppers, honey and lamb.

His other son, Tashi, who is a medical student, is destined to become a doctor, but influenced by his father's love for Tibetan Opera, he wants to become a performer instead.

"Tibet's rich cultural heritage deserves attention beyond the symbolic level. Without relying on a dramatic storyline, the drama portrays contemporary life, using a

fresh narrative and genuine emotion, and delves into intergenerational dynamics. It offers a strong sense of realism and engagement, providing viewers a moment of relaxation, and also a chance to reflect on their relationship with parents," Xu Ruofeng, a Douban user, commented after watching the series.

The series also makes the most of the picturesque scenery of Xizang and the enduring beauty of its cultural heritage, including aspects such as *thangka* paintings, Tibetan

Opera, and Tibetan embroidery.

It took three years to create, and involved traveling over 4,100 kilometers to interview 132 individuals from various backgrounds, leading to reams of notes, according to scriptwriter Yu Xiaoqian.

"In the creative process, the first thing to discard is the perspective of a tourist or an outsider. We aim to tell the stories from the local perspective," says Yu.

In Lhasa, Yu met young people from varied walks of life, including teahouse workers, fashion

brand owners, art curators, rappers, stand-up comedians and heritage conservationists. Tashi, one of the characters in the series, is inspired by a nurse who is also a Tibetan rap singer Yu met during his travels.

The series focuses on the common challenges faced by young people, such as intergenerational differences, preserving traditional culture, dealing with long-distance relationships, and navigating the conflict between career and hobbies.

"Young people from different places may have cultural differences, but we also share many commonalities, and that commonality is what I want to present most," says Zhou You, who plays Sonam.

Liu Shuxin, a professor at the School of Journalism and Communication at the Minzu University of China, says that the series blends the cultural elements of Tibetan Opera, traditional Tibetan medicine, equestrian sports and Tibetan attire, offering a glimpse into contemporary urban life in Lhasa. The story combines practical wisdom with romanticism, reflecting the shared values of truth, kindness, beauty and bravery that transcend ethnic and regional boundaries, and resonating with people of diverse cultural backgrounds in China.